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AUTHOR	Povey, John F.
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ABSTRACT

In summer 1974, an intensive English language program on the Lubumbashi campus of the National University of Zaire was organized, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation which is committed to supporting higher education in Zaire. The need for such a program arises from the determination of newly independent countries to achieve wider multilateral economic and political relationships. These require English, the major language of international communication. Because of their linguistic fragmentation, countries outside of the anglophone regions are forced to acquire English as a third or even fourth language within their educational systems. This additional linguistic demand imposes learning difficulties that can only be resolved by efficient methods based upon a knowledge of the particular social and linguistic system. To examine this problem, selected faculty members from within the university system, as they learned English, were subjected to a series of tests to determine the effectiveness of various approaches with students of different competences and backgrounds. The report describes the planning rationale and the teaching methodology. It includes substantial statistical analysis which, if necessarily limited in its general applicability by the small numbers under study, does offer some potentially valid information concerning such programs and their potential. (Author)

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ZAIRE: A SUMMER ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM

John Povey

During the summer of 1974 several people from the ESL Department of UCLA were involved in an intensive English language program on the Lubumbashi campus of the University of Zaire. The directors of the program were Professors John Povey and Earl Rand. The teaching staff were largely from UCLA; Fred Rosensweig and Paul Hamel, M.A. (TESL), from our program and Judy and Norman Garry from the Department of Linguistics. The fifth member was Susan Labin from the USC Department of Sociology who was added to undertake continuing professional evaluation of the program.

The program derived from consultations held by John Povey with the Rockefeller Foundation in New York and their representative in Kinshasha, Dr. James Coleman (once director of the UCLA African Studies Program). The Rockefeller Foundation had made Zaire a priority in their activities in Africa, recognizing the enormous political potential of its size, position, and wealth on the continent. Possibilities for programs of aid and assistance in educational and economic change were inhibited by the limitation in the use of English in the country. To undercut this difficulty, a brief review of the history of the language problem might be useful.

Africa is endowed (or bedevilled) by an incredible variety of languages. No one seems certain how many languages are in use, but Nigeria alone may have a hundred tongues, and these not proximate ones like French and Italian but derived from totally different linguistic roots. When the colonialists occupied most of Africa, they enforced their languages deeply into the social context of the countries. Colonial languages were used in government, education, and all national communications. At independence there was no regional vernacular which could acceptably be declared the national language. The colonial language remained as the overall means of communication beyond the local level.

Those countries that inherited English have found themselves luckier than those who acquired French, as clearly English has displaced French as the major language of international usage. This may appear less of a handicap in a country like Ivory Coast where the ties with France, cultural and above all financial, remain strong. In Zaire which is deliberately seeking a major international role, French is a restriction. This feeling does not derive from any absolute determination to develop close links with the U.S.A., though these appear to be forthcoming. Rather it is in recognition of the fact that English is the second language of so much of the rest of the world. It functions in that role in so many countries of Europe (Russia, Hungary, Germany, etc.) and of the Far East (Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia). This makes the ability to employ English a priority of development.

With French dominant in the school system, it is hard to engender effective levels of competence in the English as foreign language classes that occupy only 3-5 hours per week within the system. Nor can one realistically anticipate the elimination of French in favor of English. The elite have too vested an interest

in the language in which their own authority is established. There is recognition of the increasing need for English but it must be incorporated into an educational system where it can at best be a third or more often a fourth language. Any rectification of this overall situation at a national level even if politically possible, would be a monumental task requiring tremendous investment of resources. For English teaching to be in the least effective, it would have to be a vehicle of instruction in at least some subjects. This would require an enormous commitment to teacher retraining. If it is not too cynically rational, one could probably find ammunition to support the belief that judging by the minimal results, even the attempt to teach classroom English is an extravagant use of the limited funds of educational investment. Probably the need for English could best be advanced by isolating real areas of need and offering very intensive short-term programs. These could be tailored to fit the requirements of adults such as hotel people, bank and government workers, sustained by the highest economic motivation. This general question would make the basis for another long paper. Our own plans were for just such a highly specific, short-term course, aimed at fulfilling special professional needs. This is the kind of course which generally gets the maximum results. More importantly although scarcely cheap, a course given by visiting American teachers in the locality may be as economical and efficient a means of encouraging English learning as any other arrangement. In the past students had been sent abroad, an activity that obviously appealed considerably both for its pleasure and its prestige.

One interesting experiment with Zairois had been tried the previous year. A group of Zairois had been sent to Ibadan University in Nigeria to learn English. There was at least a commendable surface logic in this decision. It was argued that the training activity would valuably sustain and extend the facilities of the host university, that the Zairois would learn English in an anglophone environment, but one with an African context. In practice it proved not to be an ideal solution. Outside of the classroom not only was the local English of a highly modified variety barely intelligible to the visitors, but the students' sense of cultural isolation was not apparently markedly diminished by the fact that the foreign context was an African one. All the common problems of visiting groups were encountered. Community isolation inevitably occasioned language isolation and participants were driven by a combination of need and preference to interaction with each other in French rather than in the target language.

Although it is certain that bilingual development in the long run can only be fostered by programs within Africa, this program seemed to indicate for the present short run that there would be little perceptible diminution of English usage if classes were conducted in the francophone environment of Zaire. Subsequent reinforcement and development of the language to full communicative efficiency in preparation for American studies or travel could be achieved for a selected group of the most competent in English-speaking Africa or in America.

After reviewing these past attempts, it was decided to organize a highly intensive English language summer program in Zaire and move the American teachers to Africa rather than the Africans to the States. In simple terms of transport costs, one American teacher could service ten students, and at least for the local participants there would be no living expense. In its diagnosis of the situation in the University of Zaire, Rockefeller felt that it would be possible to affect certain minimal essential needs by searching within the university

system for those who, in learning English themselves, would become the catalysts for subsequent, more extensive change. With this intention they isolated a series of key people in a program that would continue the important and long-term commitment to university staff development. There were staff members holding important positions in the administration. There were certain senior staff members and a number of junior faculty who were already earmarked as being likely to be sent to the States for further graduate study. They came from the three campuses of the university system: Kinshasa, Kisingani, and Lubumbashi. The Lubumbashi campus was selected as the site of the project because it was [illegible] the major language teaching center for the system, and its facilities were assessed as the best for the purpose of a summer school. These were to be the participants in a plan for an experimental, intensive summer program.

We had planned an eight-week program which became somewhat abbreviated because of problems of getting the facilities ready at the beginning, which were anticipated, and the Muhammed Ali fight at the end, which wasn't. Nevertheless, considerable English was offered and quite remarkable progress was made by the participants. This was particularly obvious in the case of those who had some previous distant and entirely passive background of English language learning at school, although this was not immediately apparent in functional communication and was not always obvious in the results of the initial tests. It did provide a concealed but valuable background. As our emphasis on speech, required by the techniques of the oral-aural method, developed the speaking skills, at the same time it continuously unearthed layers of unrecognized and unacknowledged language memory buried under the strata of daily familiarity with French. No less than 75% admitted to having had some, often minimal and remote, school contact with English, and this fact, coupled with the discovery that all the participants had the intellectual competence demonstrated by holding at least post-B.A. status, may have given us participants with most superior potential for our work. Yet if such students are not average, they are not atypical of those professionals amongst whom the most intense English language needs are to be found.

The course itself began with testing and evaluation. Forty-two participants were selected and attended the opening day's sessions. Several means were employed including standard published tests, such as McCall-Crabbs. Since there was a relatively luxurious staff-student ratio, each student was interviewed separately by three faculty members for class placement. These interviews were modeled on those given for evaluating language competence by the Foreign Service in Washington. One might initially feel convinced that as they represent opinion they would form at best a questionable personal estimate, subject to all kinds of imponderable prejudices. However, they were conducted by experienced professionals, and it is important to confirm that these were as efficient and accurate a series of tests as any we presented. The screening results they provided almost perfectly matched the levels to which the participants were allocated. That remarkably few later reconsiderations proved to be necessary is one proof of their surprising reliability. The format of these interviews is fairly standard, but perhaps should be outlined. There were four activities:

1. A series of ten questions in English. The subject matter was assumed to be familiar, but the queries themselves were carefully graduated in a hierarchy of syntactic difficulty and so demanded increasing complexity in the student response.

2. The student had to write a single sentence from dictation to check the simple encoding of writing/spelling.

3. The student was required to listen and repeat three sentences arranged in a sequence of increasing length and syntactic difficulty as a check of retention and comprehension.

4. The student simply read a paragraph aloud to display his ability to articulate English with reasonably adequate pronunciation and intonation.

As a result of these tests, the group was divided into three classes in the common sequence of elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The patterns of the class lesson were similar for each except for the level of difficulty.

It had been intended to run morning and afternoon classes, but because of complications of transport, that became impossible and so we held only an exceptionally intensive five-hour morning session. Ideally this would seem too long; too demanding of the attention span, but the students seemed to prefer the personal leisure it provided. This arrangement also made occasional impromptu afternoon activities possible. The demands on student effort were reduced by planning the classes so that they began when the students were fresh, with the most exhausting activities and gradually substituted more casual and entertaining interactions and less structured activities.

With the classes set up we were able to establish fairly specific and detailed behavioral objectives. In reading we estimated that we could reasonably aim at a grade 7 standard for the elementary grade, a grade 9 level for the intermediates, and a grade 12 level for the advanced students. This aim was achieved but the results of the tests at the conclusion of the program deserve a mention for they indicate a curious situation. When the standard McCall-Crabbs non-fiction tests were applied, each of the different groups in fact tested out at a level of about 11 plus. This seemed so improbable as to indicate error in the method, but we hypothesize that the tests, which do not have a speed component, do not sufficiently discriminate skills at the more advanced level. Given time and application, even those with relatively limited amounts of English can achieve good levels of comprehension. Perhaps this competence is also particularly true in this situation, where we had such an academic and book-oriented series of students. However, it is likely that the same results would obtain in our own ESL classes at UCLA which similarly deal primarily with graduate students.

The objective in writing was achieved in a way that more closely matched our expectations. The elementary group--virtually beginners--were required to produce an accurate paragraph with topic sentence and reasonable development. The intermediate group was to present a logically organized 250-word expository essay. The advanced group would achieve a 400-word essay with coherent development of subject and a proper introduction and conclusion couched in accurate English. Our classes were planned to allow us to reach towards the accomplishment of these defined objectives.

Classes began with a half hour of listening comprehension followed by a forty-five minute period of formal grammar. There was a half hour of reading and writing and a further "core" period of grammar. After a snack generously provided by Dr. Coleman, there was a forty-minute period of "situational" English. This proved to be one of the most appreciated and valuable activities

because from it the students gained such a ready and immediate sense of achievement and the functional utility that often appears lacking in classroom exercises. The long morning concluded with an hour of mixed activities in which the various levels were not separated. They mixed to play word games, joined in the popular singing programs, and on one memorable occasion spent several days running a highly effective "court" organized by Paul Hamel. This project was taken so seriously that it required portrayal of the entire legal apparatus--judge, plaintiff, defense, prosecution attorneys, and a series of witnesses who, being uninformed about the subject of the crime delivered a wealth of exciting evidence probably no more conflicting in its detail than that encountered in a regular courtroom!

During the afternoons we got very good response to many casual activities such as a visit to the zoo, films at the American cultural center and debates. Small groups met quite regularly for informal conversation and help in the houses of the faculty. With all of these things we tried to reinforce the use of the English learned in the classroom and make some partial recompense for the lack of English experience to be found in the totally francophone environment of Eastern Zaire.

Because our staff included Susan Labin, who was formally trained in evaluation of programs, we were able to go more deeply than usual into the motivations and reactions of the participants and our discoveries may be important when further such projects are planned. Questionnaires were developed that included both closed and open ended questions. The intentions declared to be the major motivation of the eager participants in this summer course were significant, although it could be argued that they occasionally overlapped one another (presumable professional needs might be deemed to include reading English materials, etc.). The four determinations most regularly declared in response to queries concerning the reason English was likely to be important to them were for:

1. Future professional needs
2. Travel to anglophone countries in Africa and elsewhere
3. Reading English language materials in their fields of study
4. Conversing with non-French speaking visitors.

To questions aimed at determining the general significance of English, an extraordinary 98% of the participants responded that English "was now more important than before." Participants recognized that it was the ability to read English that was going to be most vital to them in their work, but it was the incapacity to speak English that concerned them most and was a priority in their requests for class instruction. There is some paradox here in that higher demand should surely be for the most urgently required skill. However, as with many students previously introduced to a language by the translation-reading-grammar-book method, there is a sense of particular frustration in the total inability to talk the language. No doubt this feeling was exacerbated by their realization that they were going to have to interact with us in oral classroom work.

One important experiment may well be of future importance. The costs of setting up anything like a language lab were obviously prohibitive in equipment alone, besides the additional costs and difficulties of erecting housing for its protection and function. We therefore had the idea of buying fifty small battery cassette recorders for individual use. Wholesale these quite

adequate machines are down to less than $30 apiece in this country. The entire lot for our program cost less than the console of a formal language lab system. Being battery powered they were also ideal where the outlets of electric power were so limited. The best quality batteries lasted three weeks of quite intensive use. The recorders were immensely popular (perhaps occasionally for the pleasures of recording "Congo-jazz" outside of classroom hours). They were carried everywhere and provided an instant means by which the participants could try out and test their English. They were handy for a variety of classroom exercises. They were more flexible than fixed equipment and would be an economical and valuable item in any such program, and were received with high enthusiasm and regularly used. The only disadvantage we discovered was that they were not effective at full volume in an entire class situation because of distortion. In the future we feel it would be essential to buy one larger and more effective amplifying machine for the public usage that is required when tapes are used as, for example, the source of test phrases and conversation drill. The results of our program can be measured by quantitative analysis as well as by offered opinions. Both were gratifying. When our triple personal interviews were given originally at the beginning of the program, we encountered and recorded the following ability levels: (on a scale from 0-5 with 5 reserved for native speaking fluency.)[1] Eleven were rated as grade one, thirteen as grade two, and eight were set as grade three (three being the highest rating that was obtained at that time).

The same triple interviews held at the end of the course, revealed very encouraging and significant improvement. Only two remained at level one (both incidentally from the Lubumbashi campus, which is one piece of evidence of the problems of locals whose studies are more constantly interrupted due to their proximity to their offices which brings them constant unavoidable demands and missed classes.) Nine were now at level two, seventeen at three, and many of these averaged out at a clear three plus rating. Four had now reached level four which is a very high standard of communicative competence exceeded only by the five level reserved for native speaking fluency.

Similar progress was measured when the participants were tested in order to set them into the equivalent measure of the UCLA entrance standards. Our TESL entrance tests measure the student's placement onto our four-term sequence of 832, 33A, B, and C courses, or grant complete exemption from remedial English work. These are quite severe standards because they are measured against our estimate of whether the student can function adequately without further preparation in an American academic environment that provides only English.

At the beginning of our program, judged by UCLA requirements, eleven would have required four quarters of English, thirteen would have required three. We estimated five would demand two terms and three one term only. We did not find a single participant who would be exempt from further English by UCLA standards. (Under the circumstances this was not particularly surprising since many had joined this program precisely because they were aware that they could not meet the requirements of American university entrance standards, and they were hoping to obtain scholarships for further education in the States.)

Such was the improvement detected after the intensive weeks of study in this summer program, that by the end of our course we found only five students who by the UCLA standard would need the full four terms, two who would need three,

twelve who required two quarters, and eleven requiring only one quarter of English language work. Two students now rated complete exemption. These students exhibited a fairly rapid growth of competence deriving from the teaching they had received.

One further response to the questionnaire must be included if only out of immodesty. Asked their opinion of the program, of the final thirty-two respondents, twenty-eight rated it at the good or excellent end of the scale. Thirty-one said that they would recommend others to take another such program should it be offered.

There was a revealing measurable tendency for the more advanced students to assess the program most favorably. We felt in analyzing this response that it related less to any inferiority of the elementary classes than that the sense of improved communicative achievement was far more obvious and noticeable at that higher level. Our tests indicated in fact that considerable progress had been made by the beginners when one considered the minimal competence exhibited at the start of the program. But the elementary group still had that personal awareness that they had not achieved that happy state of fluency and accuracy which is the dream of any language learner.

This program had many things that aided its effective performance: considerable local support, enthusiastic and intelligent participants and a good teacher-student ratio. Yet we also had the usual problems and emergencies inescapable in projects in Africa, especially one somewhat hurriedly planned from abroad. Nevertheless, the results make clear that with application on the part of both teachers and students, very marked advances can be made even in such relatively short-term programs, for intensity substantially makes up for the limitation of the time period available. A most significant question will be whether this degree of English language acquisition "takes" or whether it will be substantially diluted through lack of usage and reinforcement locally. We had ambitious plans for follow-up work on the individual campuses, and we hope that the achievement of this program and its participants will extend and develop a firm basis for continuing English language usage in Zaire.

FOOTNOTES

1. The number actually listed in these statistical results is only 32 because we wished to indicate the improvement in each student and only 32 could be matched in pre- and post tests. Some late arrivals and early departures reduced the numbers of those who took both tests. These gaps were unavoidable because we were attempting to squeeze a longer program than was perhaps reasonable into a restricted local vacation period.